

Commentary

## Surf and Turf Wars Online—Growing Implications of Internet Gang Violence

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### Abstract

To examine use of the Internet by gangs and its affect on youth, i-SAFE Inc. collected information from more than 100,000 students and 137 gang associates from an urban population. Although individuals who associate with a gang have distinguishable discrepancies in the amount of time spent online, they have similar online behavior as compared with those who are not involved with gangs. Additional research is necessary to develop a substantive link between gangs online and the school and community culture. © 2007 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

### Keywords:

Internet; Safety; Gang; Violence; Cyber bullying; i-SAFE

The Internet is the most significant decentralized medium in the world. Minute-by-minute the Internet is mushrooming both in the volume of content available to users as well as in the numbers of new users who access its content. As media amalgamate on the World WideWeb and the proliferation of new online users expound, there is an increasing public health concern. This is especially true in regard to youth, as the Internet provides a growing unmonitored and uncensored environment that exposes them to explicit content and to peer groups that they may not typically encounter in their schools and communities.

One specific youth market segment that is emerging on the Web is gangs. It is important that we assess the development of gangs online, the affects of their behavior to other online users, and the effects of their online behavior to others offline (in the physical world).

There are unique challenges inherent in reaching out to adolescent and teenage gang members to validate their online behavior, including the following: (a) youth gang members are an inclusive group; (b) the volume of gang members is not very populous; and (c) many youth gang members require transportation or reimbursement to participate in data gathering exercises. All of these barriers

of entry make it difficult to substantially assess a gang member's online behavior. Although it is common knowledge that students are online at an alarming rate, it is less widely recognized that the same is true of gang members.

Although data are lacking that show the true prevalence and extent of adolescent gang members on the Internet and what their activities consist of, a small survey [1] showed that 25% of gang members used the Internet 4 hours per week and that 45% of gang members gained access to the Internet at community centers. Most alarming, 70% of gang members reported that it was easier to make friends online than in the real world. These results provide interesting insights into online activity, Internet access, and Web socialization habits.

Why are gangs beginning to have a presence online? The Digital Divide (Internet-access “haves” and “have nots”) is diminishing, and parity in obtaining access is surfacing. Computers have become increasingly affordable, Internet access is easily acquired, and if there are barriers to gaining access to the Internet at home, they are commonly overcome through the ever-increasing numbers of public institutions that provide complimentary online access. Furthermore educational institutions across the country are implementing comprehensive technology learning in classrooms. Students are being exposed and assigned tasks to develop, design, and publish websites for public view. This education is a catalyst for youth to express themselves online.

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There is a lot of synergy between student behavior online and a child's rationalization to join a gang in his/her community. According to the At Risk Online: National Assessment of Youth on the Internet and the Effectiveness of i-SAFE Internet Safety [2] self-administered, educator-assisted, voluntary online survey with 227,000 students youth. Findings are summarized below.

Among students in grades 5–12, 25% report feeling better and/or more positive about themselves while online than they do in the real world and 27% feel that it is easier to be accepted into online groups than real-world groups at school.

More interesting is the survey's data indicating that many students believe that parents have not established rules in the home regarding their Internet use.

Among students, 41% do not share where they go or what they do on the Internet with their parents and 26% of students believe their parents would at least "be concerned" if their parents knew what they did on the Internet.

Children are of the opinion that they are the primary information technology administrators in the home, and many believe that they know more than their parents about the Internet.

In all, 89% of students state that they are the primary users of technology in the home, whereas 18% of parents state that they are the primary users of technology in the home.

Curiously, this supercilious vantage is not challenged as many parents agree that the child in the home is the primary user of technology.

A child's desire for respect and, ultimately, for acceptance appears to be key in drawing a correlation between the online and offline activity of gang members. Being the primary technology-/Internet-skilled individual in the home provides a young person with a new form of respect. The desire for a child to be respected is not a new phenomenon. The attitude (to be respected) is consistent with children universally. Children desire to be respected by their parents, guardians and peers, and the same is true of youth who join gangs. This association is a key cornerstone and a major determinate for a young person to join a gang. According to Mayo [3], a significant reason that young people join gangs is to garner respect. In support of Mayo's claim, 74% of gang members who distinguish themselves as frequent users of the Internet report that they have established a website to "show or gain" respect for their posse [1]. Clearly gangs are online and want others to acknowledge and respect their authority. Should we consider that this trend in the physical world will transfer to the online world in greater proportions as online gang presence increases?

Students are social animals and flock to the Internet to create and foster new relationships. This is a particularly momentous phenomenon when the growth of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Xanga, and Bebo are taken into consideration. The Internet bridges individuals from a variety of backgrounds on a single, level

playing field. One of the strongest predictors of sustained gang affiliation was a high level of interaction with anti-social peers. In fact, in their comparison of stable and transient gang youth, Battin-Pearson et al reported that the strongest predictors of sustained gang affiliation were a high level of interaction with anti-social peers and a low level of interaction with pro-social peers [4–6].

One example of how anti-social peers can influence others online is the phenomenon known as Happy Slapping. Originating in the United Kingdom in 2005, Happy Slapping is defined as an assault on an unsuspecting victim. The assault is typically recorded on a camera phone and then uploaded to the Internet for the world to see. Although purported to be playful and humorous in intent, Happy Slapping has become increasingly more violent, even leading to death in some instances. With a growing induction of globally accessed websites promoting Happy Slapping behaviors, recent stories that document incidents have emerged in France, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, and Australia. In essence, the Internet provides a global grass-roots environment for this type of anti-social behavior to be discussed, explored, and disseminated, and it is not difficult to foresee the potentials. For example, as young people become more entrenched in interaction with anti-social peers, and their propensity to participate in anti-social behavior increases, Happy Slapping by online gangs could lead to the real possibility that this behavior would be glamorized and reach a "tipping point" where more and more physical assaults would be conducted and published online.

The solution to rectify these types of concerns is not easy to find. Removing technology access is not a feasible solution. Implementing blocking or filtering software is not prudent. Clearly additional research is necessary to develop a substantive link between gangs online and the school and community culture. Until that time, however, it is critical that we recognize the role that real-world education can play in promoting online citizenship and in enabling a safer Internet.

Real-world education cannot be taught just in the classroom. The best way to ensure that students institute safe and responsible online use is to have their parents practice and reinforce safety tactics in the home. Parents must have the knowledge and resources to enable them to exercise and implement appropriate safety precautions for their children before it is too late. With parental support and involvement, students are more likely to practice safe and responsible behavior, making everyone's online experience more safe and secure.

Clearly there is a need for formal research on the effects that the presence of gangs online have on youth at risk for gang involvement. In the meantime, parents and educators need to take action *now*. To compete in today's global economy, youth need to acquire and exercise critical thinking skills essential to making responsible, informed deci-

sions when confronted with subtle or blatant online dangers. Education and empowerment are the keys to protecting children from online harm so that all children may become upstanding cyber citizens in the future.

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